

“Always We Begin Again”

Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; John 3:1-8

Sermon 1 of 4 in the Season of Creation

Those of us of a certain age may find it difficult to hear the famous words of our first lesson without also hearing the pop song by the Byrds, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” And although it was embraced by idealistic peace activists throughout the 1960s and 70s, the song is more than an idealistic wish: it’s grounded in the reality of creation.

Life has both a linear and a cyclical quality about it. You and I inhabit a constantly changing and constantly recurring world. It is made up of the novel and of the predictable.

September is the month when many of us recognize both of these simultaneous and constant realities: the season of change and the season when the familiar returns.

And we know this, first of all, by the changes that creation shows us.

The other day, I took a picture of the first yellow leaves on the maackia tree in my front yard and sent it to my nephew in Alabama. “It’s starting,” I said, and he knew exactly what I meant.

A new season, a new school year, a new program year, a changing church, the turning of the natural world.

And we are part of all of that change and more.

And we’ve seen it all – or at least most of it – before. That’s the point Qoheleth is making. There is a time to love, a time to hate, a time to build and so forth because we’ve seen those times again and again. The unfolding of creation is our way of speaking about all of that coming and going.

And so we enter the Season of Creation, a short season in the ecumenical church year that begins with the World Day of Prayer for Creation on September 1st and runs through October 4th, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology. Forest Hill Church is deeply committed to social justice, and social justice begins with ecological justice: our ethical treatment of a creation that belongs to God.

Whether we are building up or tearing down, whether we are on the brink of coming into this world or on the edge of leaving it, whether we vote red or vote blue, all of it happens within and through the agency and constancy of creation.

We are creatures living within a creation we did not make, cannot control – although we think we do – and do not fully understand. For the next few weeks, I will be reminding us of our responsibility as tenants in God’s space, as pilgrims on a journey along God’s paths, and as stewards of God’s garden.

And I’m beginning with Ecclesiastes – Qoheleth, in Hebrew, meaning “Preacher” or “Teacher” – who looks at the world and discovers that there is a time for everything, but **the world does not operate according to our timetable or according to our wishes.**

We want beginnings and endings and everything in between to make sense. We want to know how we got here and where things are headed. We want to be in control.

But:

“God has made everything suitable for its time,” Qoheleth reminds us.

The fitness of creation – its goodness – is according to God’s **unlimited** perspective, and only occasionally according to our **limited** perspective.

And then the wonderfully unsettling observation:

“Yet no one can find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

We begin again not because we have everything figured out, but because we haven't. And because we never will, always we begin again.

That’s what Jesus is telling Nicodemus in our second lesson: if we want to live the reality that includes God as well as God’s world, we have to begin again. And again. And again.

The season of creation reminds us that we are creatures: fragile, frail, vulnerable, uncertain, and utterly dependent.

Our lives are completely networked – with one another, with creation, and with creation’s Creator – so that one of the great gifts of the season of creation, if we will accept it, is a proper sense of **humility**.

We want control. Ecclesiastes tells us we don't have it. Therefore, humility isn't an optional virtue; it is the appropriate posture of creatures like us.

When I mentioned humility a couple of sermons ago, I said that humility does not mean thinking less of ourselves than we should. Humility means knowing our place in what Mary Oliver calls “the family of things.”

And what is that place?

Ecclesiastes again (3:18):

“I said to myself with regard to humans that God is testing them to show that they are but animals.”

And, at the same time, Ecclesiastes says (3:11):

“God has made everything beautiful in its time and has set eternity in human hearts.”

The Teacher says that we are **finite** creatures with a sense of the **infinite**, a marvelously maddening combination that is uniquely ours—or at least uniquely ours as far as we know. And one of the gifts of this season of creation is the invitation to ask ourselves **how other creatures participate in the mystery of God in ways that we don’t understand.**

And so, on one level we are, as the conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote in the middle of the last century, plain members and citizens in the land of the living.

But on another level, we are a little lower than divine beings, according to Psalm 8.

And both of those statements are true.

So we are this curious, baffling mix. And that self-knowledge seems to be one of those loves that will not let us go. It draws us back to itself, again and again, daring us to try to figure ourselves out.

Are we basically good or basically bad?

Is our problem a lack of knowledge or a lack of love?

Do we learn from our mistakes or are we doomed to repeat them?

And that’s why, in John McQuiston’s wonderfully succinct summary of Benedictine spirituality:

Always, we begin again.

We return to the source of our being for insight, strength, and courage.

Because life keeps beginning again whether we are ready for it or not.

There **is** a time to plant and a time to uproot.

There **is** time to weep and a time to laugh.

There **is** a time to mourn and a time to dance.

Those times are ours **because life happens**. We change. We go on.

And much of it **we don't control**.

We often think of beginning again as something we do. Ecclesiastes suggests that sometimes beginning again is something that happens to us.



When I talk with loved ones after someone dies, I remind them that their relationship with the person who has died has not ended. **It has changed**. It has changed dramatically, and it will never be again what it once was, and the task for the living is to keep up with their new reality, a new reality carved out of creation by life itself. Life keeps moving, whether or not we have finished making sense of its last chapter.

And what does a humble creature do when it realizes it cannot comprehend or control the whole? It pays attention.

The season of Creation is **an invitation for a creature with appropriate humility to pay attention**.

I heard someone say a long time ago that the first moral act is to pay attention, and we have vast experience supporting this statement.

Children, for example, who have been neglected have great difficulty growing into their adult social identities, which is why we consider child neglect to be both a sin and a crime. Not only have we harmed someone in our generation, but we have transmitted that harm into another generation.

Privilege is, among other things, the freedom not to pay attention to realities that other people—or other creatures—cannot afford to ignore.

White privilege doesn't pay attention to all the realities that people who are not white have to pay attention to.

Class privilege doesn't pay attention to the myriad ways poverty and under-employment affect more than our bank accounts.

And species privilege doesn't pay attention to the ways our decisions about the material world affect other species.

Before we offer fixes, solutions, or programs, let us simply give ourselves to the world in love **by paying attention.**

Mary Oliver, the poet from Maple Heights, was one of the people who helped millions of us pay attention to the world around us.

And the late Wendell Berry, another articulate advocate for creation, spent a lifetime writing and speaking on behalf of soil, water, sunlight, and air. Berry urged us to pay attention to what our mechanized, globalized, industrialized means of food production is doing to the world God made and loves.

And for Christians, paying attention to creation is not merely an ecological practice. It is a theological one.

So to frame our paying attention **as part of the Body of Christ**, I'd like for us to pay attention to three sets of teachings that are fundamental to our way of being in the world as Christian believers.

Together they ask three questions:

- **What does it mean that the world belongs to God?**
- **What does it mean that God entered this world as one of its creatures?**
- **And what does it mean that God has not abandoned this world but is redeeming it?**

So we're going to pay attention to what Scripture says about creation, that is, the world God has given us.

We're going to pay attention to what it means that God became a human person, that is, the doctrine of incarnation.

And we're going to pay attention to what Christians mean when we say that God has redeemed us and is still redeeming the world.

Those three set of teachings – the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of incarnation, and the doctrine of redemption – have profoundly shaped our lives as Christians and have given the world a huge amount of Christian thought.

But they're not often put together this way, so over these four weeks I want us to explore what happens when we bring them into conversation with each other.

In just four sermons I can't include everything, and we may not understand everything. Ecclesiastes reminds us that we won't. But I believe that we'll all benefit from the attempt.



Some of you may wonder why, at the end of our services, my blessing of all of you is in the name of the God who created and creates you and redeemed and redeems you, when those verbs ordinarily are used only in the past tense.

I do so to remind us that God is not finished with us yet. As Charles Wesley put it in his great hymn, "Finish, then, thy new creation," and that is a prayer that all of us could offer for ourselves every single day. We are all works in progress, since we are part of God's beloved and unfolding creation.

To see that creation as God sees it and to love that creation as God loves it is to learn, once again, what it means to be a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

So perhaps caring for creation begins not with learning what we should do, but with remembering what—and whose—we are.



We continue our worship by singing hymn number 775, "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me."